Georgia Archive

Volume 8 | Number 2 Article 5

January 1980

A Church Archives: The United Methodist Church in Indiana

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A CHURCH ARCHIVES: THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH IN INDIANA

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A church archives is a good thing, but must be started and maintained only for the best of reasons. A church archives must be more than a place to dump, temporarily or permanently, bulky and poorly arranged papers that might or might not be useful. It should be run by professional archivists and, whether the archives is part of the church structure or a separate organization, its functions must be clearly understood. A church archives, like university or government archives, must be a collection of records created for administrative purposes, some of which are preserved permanently because of their historical value.

Though at times only a small percentage of the population has been church members, the endurance of many church bodies and the prominence in American history of many churches and their individual members make an understanding of church history necessary for an appreciation of our heritage. Like other historical collections, church archives frequently impart much information about the administration of churches and the elite--clergy and prominent lay people--without telling much about the vast majority of church members. Church archives do, however, contain much material on the activities of their members, and that material is essential for an understanding of many political, economic, and social movements.

In the late 1700's and early 1800's, Americans moved steadily from the original, seaboard colonies to the interior, including the Northwest Territory and the rest of the area now known as the Midwest. Elders or

ministers of various religious groups, most of whom had been directly involved in the religious fervor of the Great Awakening in the South, accompanied the first settlers who moved across the Ohio River from Kentucky into Indiana. Prominent among these groups were the Methodists. Their "circuit riders" traveled regularly to the many small settlements and farms in southeastern Indiana, developing and spreading services, theology, and morality well suited to the frontier.

Because these preachers visited each church only once a month, the responsibility for much of the organization was in the hands of lay people. The principal form of worship was the class meeting. The classes visited by one circuit rider comprised one circuit which might cover several present-day counties. Soon the circuits were organized into districts, and the districts were administered through an annual conference which is still the key administrative unit in United Methodism.* Each of these administrative units generated certain kinds of records, and the Archives of Indiana United Methodism at DePauw University has attempted to collect all of them.

Like most archives, the combined Archives of Indiana United Methodism and DePauw University started much later than the institutions it documents. The Indiana conference, virtually co-extensive with the state of Indiana, was formed in 1832. The combined archives was founded in 1951 through the efforts of Worth M. Tippy, who had sought historical materials of both institutions

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*At the time of its organization as a separate body in 1784, "Methodist Episcopal" was the official name of the church. Through many separations and mergers, other names were used over the years. In 1968 the name "United Methodist" was adopted, and that designation will be used herein to refer to the present institution and to the many different antecedent churches in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

for a book on Bishop Robert R. Roberts. In that year the three separate conferences in Indiana formally designated the Archives as their repository and pledged support for its original budget, which was about three hundred dollars a year. The Board of Trustees of DePauw University also established its archives to be combined with that of the Methodist church. These administrative and legal niceties required time and trouble, but resulted in a very clear statement of the establishment and purposes of the Archives--in effect a charter--and the appointment of a Joint Archives Committee.

By that time much material had been lost and what remained was widely scattered, but careful determination of what records should be collected and persistent efforts to collect those records have resulted in an adequate and in some ways excellent documentation of the Methodist people in Indiana. These records reflect the administrative history of the church.

Much more elaborate and stylized than present Sunday school classes, the original Methodist class meeting was the unique Methodist means of guiding people to personal sanctification and community service. Only members in good standing could attend, and their tickets had to be renewed regularly. A few tickets or other notes survive in old Methodist families, and the Archives still occasionally receives one or two documents from this period. To give a picture of the weekly discussions, questionings, and testimony, the Archives relies on contemporary accounts, including biographies and autobiographies of elders and bishops. When Methodist groups became larger and there were more ministers, the intimate class meeting died out, yielding to larger and more formal worship services.

Early circuit riders sometimes recorded thirty or forty meetings in as many different locations in a one-month period. Very few records of that activity survive. Only an occasional diary of the preacher, a few

pages of reminiscences, or a contemporary account in a local newspaper reflects the difficult journeys of these early ministers. Generally there was no inclination to record meetings, baptisms, marriages, or funerals, and no place to keep such records if they had been made. In addition, the rigors of travel wore most circuit riders out very quickly, so there was a rapid turnover and a loss of continuity.

Gradually the circuits shrunk to groups of a few churches, and eventually most congregations were able to support a full-time clergyman. Then records were made and kept, at first in notebooks or ledgers and later in official church record books designed especially for the Methodist church. Many of these records have been lost; surely the quantity surviving from the nineteenth century is much less than half of the original total, but those which do survive give many details of local church life--names of members, births and deaths, acquisition of property, references to occupations, and concern with the larger church, missionary work, social services, and contemporary issues. The Archives serves as the official depository for these local churches and has about twenty-one hundred separate books of their records.

The circuits were grouped into districts for administrative purposes, and the district superintendent or "presiding elder" exercised much authority, especially in the first century of Methodism in Indiana when the church's bishops spent most of their time traveling from one conference to another. Very few records of the district superintendents survive, although the Archives now tries to obtain district office records, which concern the growth and major changes in each church. Some of the records of the district meetings, which coordinate the work of local churches, have survived.

For Methodists, the annual conferences were and are the principal administrative unit; and, fortunately, these annual meetings are very well documented.

Careful records have been kept of each meeting of each conference, and the Archives' unbroken collection of detailed minutes and reports begins with the first meeting of the Indiana conference in 1832. Their existence compensates for the general lack of district records for many years and the many gaps in local records.

By 1849 the minutes were published, and this duplication and wide promulgation have contributed to the survival of virtually all of these important records. These printed minutes include a detailed record of the annual meeting, with all motions made and resolutions passed; the list of all members of the conference (i.e., ministers); the assignments to every charge (single church or group of churches) listed by district; the reports of all committees; a statistical report of all local churches giving membership, financial statements, property transactions, and other information; and memoirs or obituaries of all ministers and prominent lay people. Sets are probably available in the national archives of each denomination and are sometimes on microfilm, so even a beginning church archives can obtain this valuable information at little or no expense.

The collections described above document the Methodist Episcopal church which has been the largest branch of Methodism in Indiana. The Archives does not have equally good collections for all branches. There are fewer records for the Methodist Protestant and Methodist Episcopal, South, churches; and for some of the non-Methodist antecedent churches, the collection does not even hold complete runs of conference minutes. The conferences which have not been organized by territory--the German Methodist conference and the Central Jurisdiction for black churches--are particularly hard to document.

An important decision to make when planning a church archives is the exact collecting area. No

institution should collect church records in a given geographical area if doing so violates the administrative organization of the church. It is necessary to consult church officials to determine the needs of the churches. When these contacts at the area, conference, district, or regional office are made, at least a brief survey should be made to determine what records, what kinds of records, and what quantity of records are already available. The core of the collection, at least the majority of printed records, might be obtained from these offices.

The national archives of each denomination is also apt to have information about local and conference activities. For example, the activities of the "Indiana area" (somewhat like a diocese) headed by a Methodist bishop are documented by records from that office, which sometimes duplicate and replace sources from the local churches. Contact with state and regional church offices should be an important part of beginning a church archives.

There is no substitute, however, for contact with all the local churches. The conference or regional office's approval of some institution as the depository for local records should be communicated to local churches through the district meetings. The archivist should provide each district superintendent or his counterpart with a list of materials wanted and some description of the services provided by the archives. As local churches close, the superintendents can see that their record books are transferred to the archives.

One of the most important messages to convey from the start is that archivists are interested in recent and current records, not just in older materials. Some churches are not now even creating some vital records such as current membership lists, and many do not preserve their "older" records of twenty years ago. The archivist, as records manager, can encourage and advise on the creation of complete and clear records

and their transfer to the archives as soon as they are not needed in each office for current administrative use. The present is just as important historically as any other era, and archivists must be sure that documents are created and do survive.

In contacting local churches, archivists will encounter the same situations which exist in other institutions. Some people will gladly hand over excellent sets of record books, but others will say they have nothing (or "nothing important") or that they still need the Sunday school notes from the 1890's. Small churches without storage facilities regularly allow secretaries and other officials of church organizations to take records home, and these will be difficult or impossible to retrieve. Visiting a few of these churches will give the archivist a clear picture of conditions and will make it easier to contact other churches by mail or telephone.

In Indiana there are now approximately fifteen hundred local churches, and DePauw is the official depository for all of them. In addition there are seven or eight hundred other churches which have been abandoned because of loss of membership or mergers. The Archives has some materials from about two thousand of these churches, but for most of them there is not enough material or not the right kind of materials. To apply records management techniques and to extend services to all these churches, the Archives undertook a Church Records Survey.

The Church Records Survey (CRS) began in 1975 with some preliminary announcements in the monthly newspaper, the Hoosier United Methodist. There followed a direct mailing to all churches of a specially printed folder describing church records and the purposes of the survey and two forms (which were not called forms). One survey sheet asked for exact present address, past addresses, other names by which the church had been known, and some basic historical information--date of first service, date of first full-time

minister, date of present and past church buildings, dates of moves and mergers, and special historical information. The second sheet provided space to list all the official records now in the church: minutes of the church board and other meetings; records of births, baptisms, confirmations, marriages, deaths, and transfers of membership; records of Sunday school classes and church societies; and any additional records available.

Five hundred of the original fifteen hundred churches have replied to the survey and the replies are extremely valuable. Making a list of records now in the church has helped local congregations realize that there are serious gaps in recent records and that their older records belong in the archives in order to prevent the unfortunate destruction of local records, which is all too often reflected in the sparseness of archival collections. Nonrespondents have already received two or three additional mailings, and the pursuit of this information will continue.

When these official contacts fail to turn up expected records, there are other possibilities. Retired ministers sometimes have kept either official record books (which they shouldn't have) or their own personal notes and pocket record books which can provide essential data. If the archives is located at a college, then the graduates of that college who are members and especially ministers of that church might have valuable material.

There are other sources of information on local churches and conferences. Most conferences have published a history of their church in that region, and some of these histories consist mostly of compilations or summaries of the information in the conference minutes or other reports. In addition, the county histories which were so popular in the late nineteenth century often contain very detailed information, especially about the founding of local churches.

Another important, though less formal, source is the local church history. Some histories held by the Archives are recent, thick, and detailed, while others are very short, handwritten accounts almost contemporary with the origins of the church they describe. Often the sources utilized in these histories are no longer available--the documents have been destroyed and the pioneers interviewed have died. While the accuracy of these histories must be questioned, they are often irreplaceable as the only source of information on the early years of churches.

In a few instances church bulletins supplement local histories. No archives can begin to save bulletins from churches, since they would take up too much space, but many churches have saved the special bulletins commemorating the dedication of a new building or an anniversary of the church. Often such bulletins, like local church histories, contain a list of ministers who served the church, and these are extremely helpful in writing church histories.*

How can an archivist do all this, make all these contacts? Only with help. The United Methodist Discipline states that every local church must have its own historian or archivist. Most churches do not, but in those that do the archivist has an interested colleague. In every conference of the United Methodist church, there is a Commission on Archives and History, ranging in size from four to twenty members. This commission can be very helpful in explaining archival programs like the Church Records Survey and in contacting people throughout the conference. Membership changes regularly, so new people become interested in church records and church history.

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*To assist in writing such histories, the United Methodist church has published a pamphlet written by Wallace Guy Smeltzer, "How to Write and Publish the History of a Methodist Church." Many of the features of this pamphlet would be helpful for any local church.

Even with help, no beginning archivist can make all these contacts, and not all the strategies suggested above are appropriate for all churches. Each archivist should review the list to determine what is best suited for a particular archives and then give priority to a few.

The contents of many church archives are as might be expected--basic information on each local church and on the conference activities. However, the records of Sunday school classes, mission societies, and other local organizations also show the extent to which church members were concerned about social and political as well as religious issues. Most of the minutes of annual meetings of each conference contain the reports of the usual committees in education, finance, appointments, and other functions along with special committees which introduced more topical resolutions on slavery, assistance for freedmen, war, the use of alcohol and tobacco, card playing, gambling, observance of the Sabbath, and social services. The yearly reports and resolutions on such topics document the social concerns of church members, and the obituaries of ministers and lay leaders demonstrate the importance of these issues in the lives of Methodists.

This sort of material makes possible an understanding of the importance of churches and church leaders in people's lives, and good use of these sources will help give the best view of state and local history. Church archivists will find that an important and growing percentage of their researchers will be historians who are studying church history as part of a wider study. Church archives are also important in the study of the hospitals, homes for the aged, orphanages, schools, and other institutions founded by the churches in the nineteenth century, whether or not they are still controlled by the church.

Indiana Methodists gave special attention to schools. In the 1830's the church committed itself to a college-educated clergy and established many liberal

arts colleges (not seminaries) to provide a good education. These colleges accepted students from other denominations, but naturally attracted most of their enrollment from the rapidly growing Methodist churches in the state.

Just as it is impossible to understand DePauw University without appreciating the history of Methodism in Indiana, so the reverse is also true. To understand Indiana United Methodism, one must understand the commitment of the church to higher education and its occasional doubts about that education. Of the fifteen or twenty colleges and universities established by the antecedent churches of United Methodism in the nineteenth century, only three survive with church connections; and their endurance is due in part to constant, statewide support of all kinds from local churches.

Most of the people prominent in the history of DePauw have been Methodists. All the presidents except the current one have been Methodist ministers, and six of them became bishops. Until recently the majority of students and faculty were Methodist. Though the university repeatedly reaffirms its connection with the church (and nine of the thirty-three members of the board of trustees are appointed by the two conferences), the student population is only about 20 percent United Methodist and the percentage is still falling slowly. Likewise, the percentage of faculty members who are Methodist is comparatively small. These changes have occurred in many church-connected universities, and the Archives must document these changes and adjust to some differences in the college-church relationship.

The Archives, a part of the administrative structure at DePauw University and since 1956 a unit of the university library, depends on this college-church relationship. The staff are employees of DePauw, but the two conferences share the annual operating costs of the archives. The annual budget is drawn up each year by

the archivist, in consultation with the director of libraries and university provost, and reviewed by the Joint Archives Committee which includes representatives from the university, the commission on archives and history of each conference, and the board of trustees. Next the budget is approved by the university and by each of the conferences. The conferences then send their share of the operating expenses, including salaries, to the university which handles all disbursements for the Archives.

What do the two institutions get for their money? For the university the Archives functions as any college archives does, with responsibility for records management and as much involvement as possible in teaching, especially student use of the archives. The Archives provides a number of benefits for the United Methodist church and gives priority in its services to constituents of the two conferences, providing service by mail, some research, and free copying for official business.

The development and growth of the Archives and its present services have been in a pattern familiar to archivists. Just as the records collected by the Archives were originally created for administrative purposes and only later saved for their historical value, so the Archives itself was established to collect and preserve materials about DePauw University and United Methodism in Indiana for the use of people connected with those institutions, and only more recently have the collections proved helpful for general researchers.

For both administrative and historical purposes, church records must be created, preserved, and made available for use. Many churches--local, district, regional, conference, state--have not yet made provision for their records. Though some materials have been lost, there are enough available now to form good collections, and more will be available in the future.

With the establishment of church archives or the cooperation of archivists in such institutions as historical societies and university archives, this important part of our heritage can be preserved and understood.

Readers who desire more information on some of the activities of the Archives at DePauw may write to the author for copies of a leaflet describing the Archives, the current annual report, and forms used for the Church Records Survey.